ABSTRACT

An archaeological excavation program has been completed for a small family cemetery located along U.S. Route 113 near Redden in Sussex County, Delaware. The program was sponsored by the Delaware Department of Transportation prior to the dualization of U.S. Route 113 between Georgetown and Milford. The cemetery was located on property within the state-owned right-of-way, and it had been unmarked and forgotten since acquisition of the property by the State of Delaware in 1911.

The cemetery appears to be a small family burial plot that was used during the late eighteenth century, most likely during the period from 1752 to 1799. During this period, attitudes toward death and the treatment of the dead in rural America exhibited a strong continuity with traditions that had their antecedents in medieval Europe, although there is no European antecedent to the use of isolated family cemeteries. Western European traditions dictated that the dead be interred in community burial grounds close to churches. The dispersal of the American colonial population among scattered farms and plantations may have led to the use of family burial plots, and this practice was well established in America by the late eighteenth century. Located on a low ridge of well-drained soil , the site conforms to the general pattern of rural family burial grounds used from the Colonial period through the mid-nineteenth century. The individuals were buried in shrouds and interred with their heads to the west and their feet to the east, following practices that date from the beginning of the Christian era. All of the individuals in this small cemetery were buried in simple hexagonal coffins that lacked decorative hardware.

The cemetery contained a total of nine individuals who represent the entire range of the human life cycle, from an infant and a young child to elderly individuals in their 50s or 60s. Among the adults, the sample includes three males and four females. The archaeological and historical evidence suggests that the individuals interred in this cemetery were of European ancestry, and the osteological evidence confirms this hypothesis. In four cases there was positive evidence of European ancestry; in the other five cases, it was not possible to evaluate the morphology associated with the population, but there was no evidence that would contradict the hypothesis of the individuals' European heritage.

None of the recovered skeletal samples provided any indication of the cause of death, and there was little evidence of pathology, with the exception of dental disease. There was some evidence of nutritional stress as well as the normal degenerative changes associated with aging. Extremely severe dental disease was single pathological condition which was ubiquitous among the adults. Every adult individual had some degree of dental decay, abscess, and loss, ranging from a moderate number of carious lesions to extreme dental disease and loss long before the individual died. It is clear that dental health in this population was very poor, and there was no evidence that any of the individuals had undergone dental work. In addition, tooth wear was quite heavy for this group in comparison with modern populations. This would have been the result of a diet of food which, compared to the modern diet, was less processed or more gritty and consequently more abrasive. If this sample is viewed, with respect to dental health, as representative of the total population, the life cycle of individuals in this population was commonly characterized by dental decay, abscess, and then loss of many teeth in middle age.